

## More than a helping hand for charities

### Groups tapping volunteers' skills

By Sacha Pfeiffer, Globe Staff | April 12, 2008

Bill Nichols is a volunteer for the Appalachian Mountain Club, but he doesn't clear trails or haul food to overnight shelters.

With a team of other professionals, Nichols, a marketing strategy consultant, is helping the outdoor group develop a plan to increase visitors to its Maine and New Hampshire sites while also reducing its carbon emissions.

Unlike the traditional image of volunteer work - whether stacking cans at food pantries or cleaning trash from vacant lots - the project requires business expertise and marketing savvy, not just time, sweat, and muscle.

"Many nonprofits need people willing to do those kinds of work, but I get more enjoyment from a multimonth project where I have a specific task and can see an outcome," said Nichols, who found the project through a program for Harvard Business School alumni. "So I get satisfaction helping these nonprofits, and I also get beneficial business contacts."

In the contemporary parlance of volunteerism, this type of public service has a name: skills-based volunteering. And in the corporate and nonprofit sectors nationwide, it is attracting growing attention.

Also called "smart volunteerism," skills-based volunteering has its roots in the legal profession, which has long embraced pro bono work as part of its culture. It matches a volunteer's corporate skills or educational experience to the needs of a nonprofit organization, particularly in areas like technology, financial services, marketing, and human resources. A personnel officer might fact-check a charity's employee handbook, an architect might draft blueprints for a nonprofit's new building, or a technology expert might design a community group's website.

The experience is doubly beneficial for volunteers and the groups they assist, proponents of skills-based volunteering say. Volunteers not only feel they've provided a valuable service, but sometimes learn workplace skills - such as managing a project or mastering a software - that make them more valuable professionally. For nonprofits, the assistance not only helps their constituents, but strengthens the charities internally.

"We're trying to reshape how people think about donating their skills," said Mary Roben, executive director of SmartVolunteer, a New York organization that runs a national online clearinghouse for skills-based volunteer projects. "We're tapping into a different type of volunteer - individuals at Fortune 500 companies who are looking to volunteer their time but can't necessarily take a full day off from work to clean a park."

A Cambridge-based nonprofit called Common Impact is playing a similar role. Using staff consultants, it helps nonprofits evaluate their internal operations.

Then it finds corporate volunteers who can work with them to improve their technology, marketing, and human resource functions.

WriteBoston, for example, a nonprofit group that puts writing coaches in Boston's public high schools, wanted to make its website more dynamic and interactive, but didn't have the in-house

ability to do that. With assistance from a team of State Street Corp. volunteers organized by Common Impact, the organization is now redesigning its site.

"I wanted our website to be more engaging, but we don't have that skill set on our staff, and nor is that my highest priority in terms of my work," said Betty Southwick, WriteBoston's director. "So having this kind of support is phenomenal."

For State Street employee Kishore Saokar, the team leader on the WriteBoston project, the volunteer work lets him use his project management and technology skills for a worthy cause. Just as with paying clients, "we're trying to provide a technology solution to a business problem," said Saokar, a project leader in State Street's technology division. "But it would be difficult for nonprofits to pay money for this work, so I felt that volunteering would be a benefit."

Several local groups offer opportunities for skills-based volunteering. Executive Service Corps of New England uses a network of senior-level executives and professionals to provide affordable management consulting to nonprofit organizations. Harvard Business School runs a program called Community Action Partners that taps the school's alumni to supply nonprofits with pro bono business consulting. Through Community Design Resource Center of Boston, community groups can receive volunteer help from architects, urban planners, and interior designers.

"You hear about pro bono a lot when it has to do with lawyers, but you don't necessarily think, 'What would pro bono look like for a human resource professional? For an information technology professional? For a finance professional?' " said Brandy Brooks, Community Design Resource Center's executive director.

For David Gamble, an architect at Chan Krieger Sieniewicz, a Cambridge architecture and urban design firm, it looks like this: designing a traffic-calming study and a recreation area for Dorchester's Columbia Point neighborhood.

"It's very rewarding, because we usually work for clients that have the resources to hire professionals, but there are other organizations that, for lack of resources or lack of experience, do not know how to get assistance," Gamble said. "Through this kind of work, you can increase your own skills as a professional and learn more about nonprofit organizations, some of which have nowhere else to go. So you know you're really needed."

Of course, the last type of volunteering some people want to do is the same work they do for their day job.

"We hear from some people who say that all day long they write [computer] code, so what they really want to do in their free time is work on riverbank restoration," said Theresa M. Ellis, the chief executive of Common Impact.

And while different types of volunteerism tap different skills, volunteering of any kind is important and worthy, Ellis and others say.

"If people are ready for something different, deeper, more committed, more complex, or more skilled, we celebrate that and we encourage that," said Patrice Keegan, executive director of Boston Cares, which organizes team-based volunteer opportunities. "But we will never trivialize any act of service, because every act of service is valuable."